

EXISTING PARK FEATURES AND FACILITIES

Akron Falls Park offers a wide range of both active and passive recreational opportunities. The following is a listing of current park highlights:

- Service/Maintenance Center
- Superintendent's residence
- Three Comfort Stations
- Concession Stand
- Approximately 15 picnic shelters
- Manmade Lake / Dam
- Regulation Basketball Court
- 5 Baseball and softball Diamonds (plus 1 Tee-ball diamond)
- 3 Tennis Courts
- 7 Soccer Fields
- Ice Skating area and Skating building (Warming Hut)
- Rock Garden
- Nature trails / Walking Paths

2.0 HERITAGE PARKS

2.1 AKRON FALLS PARK

DESCRIPTION

Akron Falls Park, in the Village of Akron and Town of Newstead, is one of the older parks in the County's overall system. It was initially built as a Village Park in the early 1930s, but was later acquired by Erie County in 1947. This 284-acre, multi-purpose park has two distinct sections; one is the older park section with sloping terrain that straddles the scenic Murder Creek, and the other is a primarily level, rectangular piece of property that extends south from near the creek to Route 5 (Main Street).

The dominant natural feature of the park is the 80'-high Akron Falls along the Onondaga Escarpment, which includes two separate cataracts on Murder Creek. The Creek then flows through a scenic glen within the park that includes an old manmade lake with dam, several islands, pathways and picnic areas. Numerous old, unique stone park structures dot the landscape, making this a "Heritage Park" by definition in this study. The southern, level park section includes a cleared, open lawn area with athletic fields (soccer) at its northern end, a large undeveloped area of woodlands with a significant wet area in its interior, and reverting meadow/naturalizing area in the southernmost area near Route 5.

PARK AND AREA HISTORY

The first settlement in the area began in 1829, and following a rapid development of commerce and industry, the Village of Akron was incorporated in 1849. Cement and gypsum industries sustained the Akron economy for over a century. In fact, once nicknamed the "Cement City," an old news article from 1884 states that "*there is hardly a piece of masonry of any importance from the Hudson River to the Rocky Mountains into which it [Akron Cement] has not entered as one of its component parts.*" In fact, there is a strong connection between the cement industry with the Akron Falls Park, including a series of mines underneath the falls and park. Remnants of one of the tunnel entrances can still be seen under the upper falls within the park. Also in 1884, the West Shore Railroad came to Akron, adding to the service provided by the New York

Central, dubbed the “Peanut Line,” running from Niagara Falls to Canandaigua beginning in 1854. As for park specific history, in 1933, the Civil Works Administration, which was funded by the PWA, initiated the development of Akron Falls Park, with approximately 90 men working for a minimum of \$15.00 per week. Later that same year the dam and artificial lake was constructed from bond funds. (The Akron News 1933 – wnyrin). Following the County acquisition in 1947, additional acreage was purchased to provide for skating and picnic space.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Akron Falls Park lies directly adjacent on the southeast side of the thickly settled Akron Village Center, and yet there does not appear to be any direct or significant relationship between the two. Parkview Drive cuts directly through the park and provides a direct connection for passing vehicles into the east end of the business district (near the historic Octagon House). The Village of Akron has been revitalized over the past few years, and has become a destination for many looking for that small, quaint historic village setting. Other area industries and businesses have flourished, including the Perry’s Ice Cream Plant on the north side of the Village.

Given its location, Akron Falls Park likely draws most of its users from the immediate area of Akron Village and Town of Newstead, as well as surrounding communities of Clarence to the west, Alden to the south, Pembroke to the east, Royalton to the north and the Town of Alabama to the northeast. The Tonawanda Indian Reservation also is within close proximity to the Park.

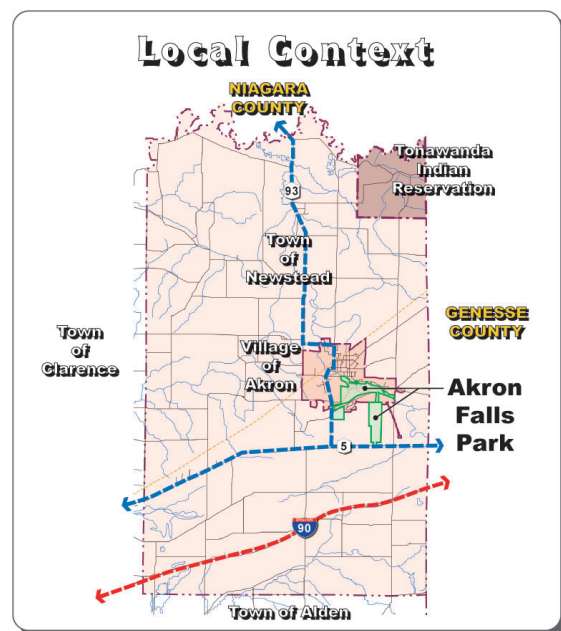
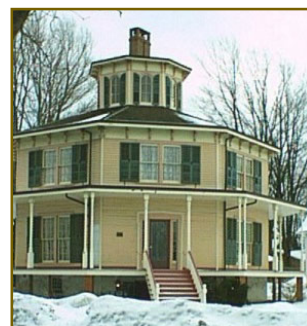
RECREATIONAL CONTEXT

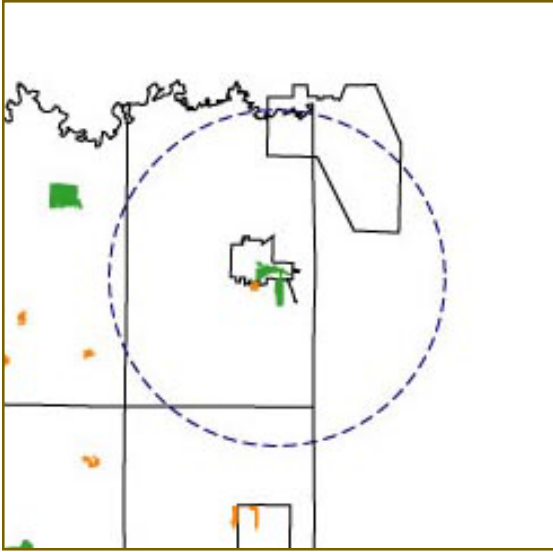
Since the earliest days of the Akron Falls Park development, the area around Akron and Newstead has seen and continues to see growth. In its earlier days, Akron Falls Park served the recreational needs of nearly all area residents. Now, with more recent developments of other local park and recreation facilities, there is less demand on Akron Falls Park for certain types of active recreation, while more and more people have rediscovered the park for its natural beauty and “heritage” features.

One significant recreational feature in the northern Erie County area is the recreational trail that links the Village of Akron to the Town of



1998 Photo by Scott A. Ensminger





NEARBY PARKS WITH UNIQUE FEATURES (WITHIN A 5-MILE RADIUS)

Village of Akron:

- Russell Park
Village center for concerts, holiday events and community affairs

Town of Newstead:

- Onondaga Escarpment State Unique Area

Town of Darien, Genesee County:

- Darien Lake State Park
Beach with water activities and overnight camping
- Six Flags Darien Lake
Nationally known amusement and concert park



Clarence. This “Rails to Trail” development on the old “Peanut Line” has the potential to eventually link Akron all the way to Ellicott Creek Park and the Riverwalk, through the Towns of Clarence, Amherst and Tonawanda.

Refer to the side-bar for a listing of nearby Town and /or Village Parks that offer various forms of recreation to the public.

CURRENT ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

- *The park is showing deterioration in its older, historic stone structures*
- *During the summer of 2002, the mill pond experienced a heavy algae cover due to minimal depth and reduced water flow. This problem continues to worsen with each year. No water flow was observed in Murder Creek in the summer of 2002, which only enhances the problems with a stagnant water situation.*
- *Old Chain Link Fencing barriers prevent people from getting glimpses of the Falls from the upper park area. Over the years, safety has become a big concern with deteriorating walkways, railings and former viewing areas.*
- *Little connection exists between the Village and the park. There is a definite lack of safe pedestrian and bicycle linkages.*
- *As resources and funding dwindle, a new strategy for lawn mowing needs to emerge. Currently, most of the open space in the park is mowed, including areas that are beyond the recreational use areas.*
- *There is an apparent underutilization of some of the park facilities, i.e. concession stand, Ice Skating lodge, etc.*

RECENT PARKS DEPARTMENT PROJECTS / IMPROVEMENTS

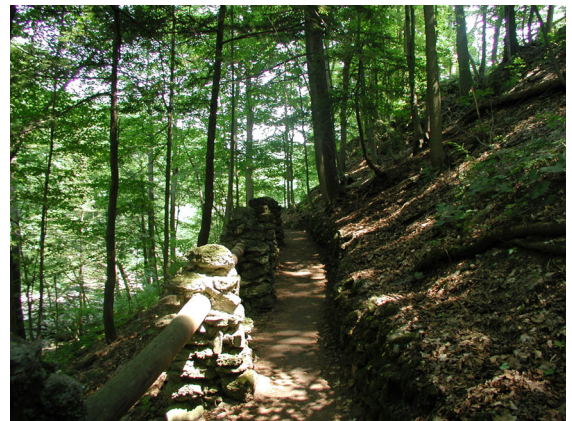
- *Numerous Roadway Repairs*
- *Basketball Court renovations*
- *Restroom renovations, including new doors, glass block windows and vents, new plumbing, concrete floor repairs, electrical updates, interior painting and ADA improvements.*
- *Debris removed, rip-rap installed and stone placed*

(FEMA Project 2000)

MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

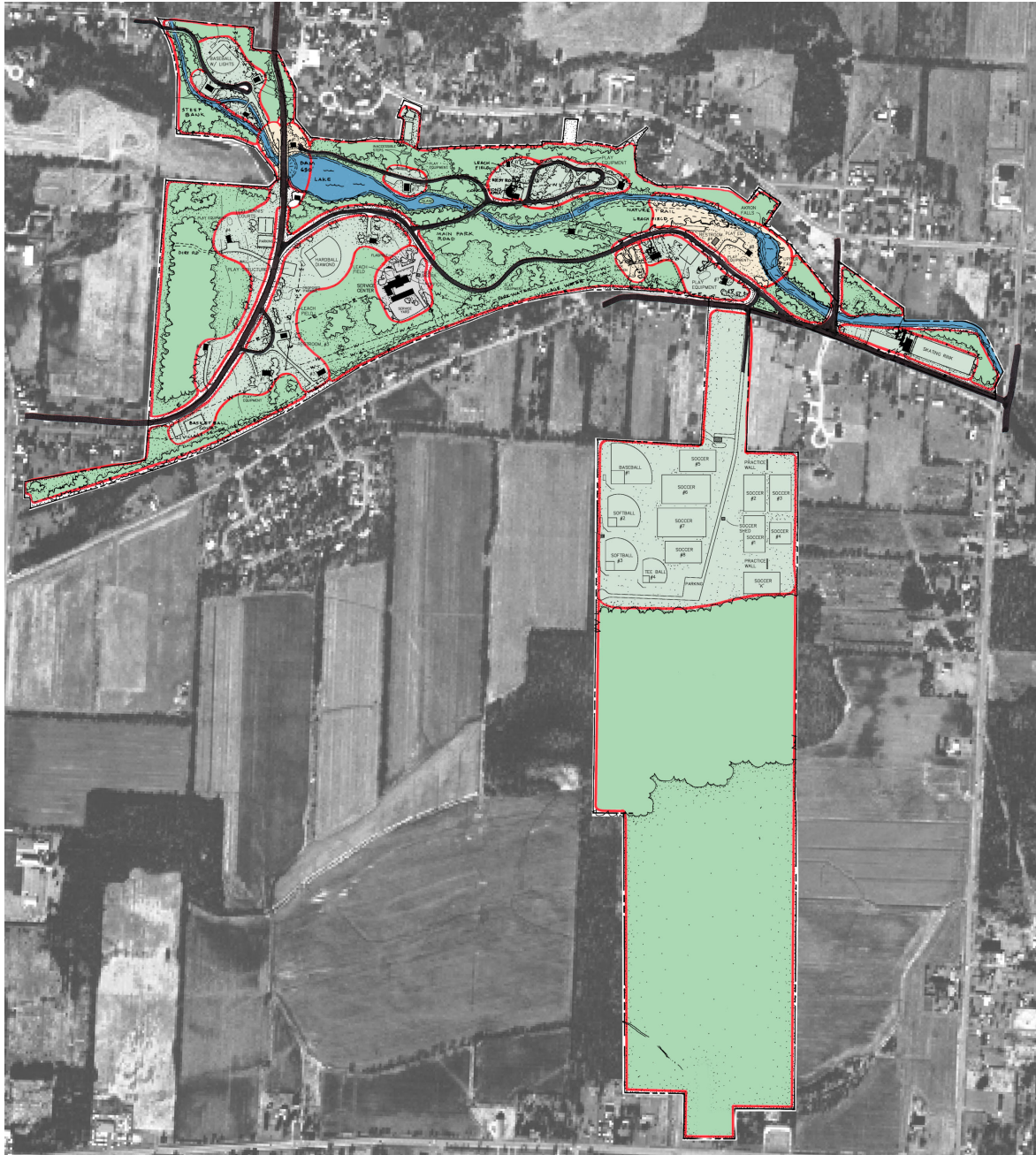
The following recommendations are tied to the illustrative graphic plan at the end of this section.

- *Preserve/enhance and restore Heritage Areas within the park – i.e. Old Rock Garden, original Picnic Groves, hillside trails with unique stone steps, posts and railings, Lower Falls viewing area, bridges and numerous stone structures;*
 - Restore old stone picnic shelters and structures before building new picnic shelters and structures. (Consider the heritage “value” of these old park features for future tourism and visitor appreciation). Consider park for eligibility on the National Register of Historic Places.
- *Enhance falls viewing opportunities at the Upper and Lower Falls; Remove old barrier fencing (chain link) and provide new ADA accessible overlook platforms with newer methods of pedestrian safety.*
 - Consider a new trail access route and viewing area to the upper falls from the north side of Murder Creek off East Avenue. This could develop into a new park attraction by “bridging” the creek between the upper and lower falls to provide new viewing and access opportunities.
- *Establish a stronger linkage between Village of Akron Business District and County Park through new sidewalks and trails, streetscape enhancements, wayfinding signage, maps, etc.;*
- *Establish more dominant “gateway” features for the park, including upgraded entrance signs, enhanced landscaping with seasonal interest, etc.*
- *Provide new interpretive signage system and informational kiosks that tie the park better into the mix with other local cultural and historical attractions.*
 - Provide an interpretive “story-line” for the Park’s geological and local history, i.e. How and when the falls were formed?; How did Murder Creek get its name?; When was the Village and Town first Settled?; What’s the history behind the Octagon House?; What were some significant historic happenings in the area, or in the park?; When were the old stone structures built?; How did the discovery of Gypsum Deposits change the Village of Akron?; What is the background of “Cement City?” etc.





- Provide interpretive signs or markers at key historic and natural sites, such as at the site of any old mills on Murder Creek, at the falls, etc.
- Enhance existing nature trail system along Murder Creek with new interpretive signage
- Consider a “Corporate Sponsorship” program which encourages local businesses to get more involved with Akron Falls Park, including sponsoring certain events, restoring older facilities and park features, setting up an interpretive signage program, selling ice cream in the park, etc.
- Improve park lake conditions through careful future dredging, aeration, improved water circulation, and aquatic plantings. This will open up additional recreational opportunities such as paddleboats or canoe use, and also provide for a much more attractive setting for the adjacent picnic groves.
- Improve fishing access and opportunities to the edge of the park lake
- Close park road on north side of lake to vehicular traffic (Eliminate or relocate picnic shelter at west end of lake).
- Possibly reconstruct the old pedestrian bridge which once connected the lower picnic grove with the Nature trail on the south side of the creek connecting to the falls..
- Reduce lawn mowing to provide more natural setting in non-use areas, and help to shift park maintenance towards restoring older park structures.
- Provide new tree plantings throughout the park, particularly along the roadway edges.
- Enhance the usage and purpose for the Cummings Lodge, located at the Ice Skating Rink. This facility could be retrofitted, or added to, to serve as a multi-purpose recreation center, “nature education center,” or other park uses, conveniently located to both the northern older section of the park and the newer, southern area of the park.
- Establish a new “Eco-Park” setting in the wooded and meadow areas south of the soccer fields, which would follow the guidelines established for “CONSERVATION PARKS.”
 - Provides a unique system of nature trails (hiking and possibly equestrian use) to view a wooded wetland and a naturalizing meadow area.
 - Provides a new recreational and educational opportunity



Legend

- Nature Reserve Zone
- Recreation Zone
- Heritage Zone
- Service Zone
- Zone Boundary

Nature Reserve Zones

Includes significant natural features or areas that require management to ensure the long-term protection of the natural heritage, i.e. woodlands, wetlands, natural open space areas (meadows), waterways, ravines, gorges and escarpment faces, steep slopes, etc.

Recreation Zones (Active and Passive)

Includes the 'maintained' landscape areas of the parks in which facilities development is permitted to support low to moderate intensity recreation activities, i.e. sports fields, specialized activities, picnic areas, campgrounds, parking lots, etc.

Heritage Zones

Includes areas of significant cultural heritage or archaeological features that require management to ensure the preservation of these important heritage assets.

Service Zones

Includes maintenance and service areas for the developed parks, as well as access points or staging areas within the Conservation Parks (e.g. trailheads and parking lots) where minimal use facilities are needed to support allowable uses within the Nature Reserve Zone.



Akron Falls Park MANAGEMENT ZONES

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to the residents and school groups in the area and region

- Provides enhanced / protected habitat for wildlife. New native plantings could be introduced to provide future perimeter buffers and enhanced wildlife habitat.
- A park roadway and limited informal parking areas would provide access into this large eco-park setting
- Future developments could include a raised overlook/ bird watching platform at the edge of the meadow, and a small nature interpretive/educational facility with meeting room.
- establish a new multi-purpose comfort facility at the south end of the soccer fields at the edge of the woods, including restrooms, possible concessions, and a potential nature-based educational facility.

- *Re-orient 2-3 soccer fields to a north-south direction to improve playability.*
- *Improve playground facilities throughout the park.*
- *Remove and replace oldest, non-compliant structures with newer equipment. Consider earth-tone colors in the Heritage park setting rather than bright, primary colors.*
- *Given its high profile location, consider consolidating a portion of the parks maintenance facility, and transforming one of the visible office structures into a more “park-friendly” facility for public usage, i.e. a visitor’s center, first-aid station, etc. The remaining service area should be screened or at least kept looking more presentable to the park users.*

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES / PARK SPECIFIC ACTIONS

PRIORITY KEY

- S Short Term *(1 - 3 years)*
- M Mid Term *(4 - 10 years)*
- L Long Term *(11 - 20+ years)*
- O Ongoing *(Continuing Efforts each year)*